

By Reps. Betty McCollum and Ander Crenshaw, Special to *Roll Call*

The reports are shocking but true. Earlier this year in Afghanistan, two girls - ages 13 and 14 - tried to escape forced marriages only to be forcibly returned by police to their village and publicly beaten. In Yemen, a 13-year-old girl died after being tied up and raped by her husband, a man nearly twice her age. UNICEF calls child marriage "perhaps the most prevalent form of sexual abuse and exploitation of girls."

Right now, the United States can be at the forefront of ending the practice of child marriage. Last week, the Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission in the House held a hearing to expose child marriage and highlight practical solutions to protect girls from this harmful practice. Congress can also take action by passing the International Protecting Girls by Preventing Child Marriage Act (H.R. 2103), a bill with 100 bipartisan co-sponsors that has the power to protect girls and bring an end to forced marriage.

Beyond violating a girl's most basic human rights, child marriage causes myriad negative educational, social and health consequences. The physical ramifications resulting from girls being forced to marry and engage in sex with adult men are obvious. In addition, child brides are at a higher risk for domestic violence, contracting sexually transmitted infections such as HIV, and complications in pregnancy and childbirth. Girls are almost always forced to drop out of school when they marry, limiting their future economic potential and perpetuating an ongoing cycle of extreme poverty.

Additionally, child marriage undermines U.S. foreign assistance investments to improve education, health and economic development. Young women and girls cannot attend a school built with U.S. assistance or access critical health information and services if she is married against her will. To make our foreign assistance more effective, we must ensure all girls can stay in school and have the opportunity to live healthy, productive lives.

The *International Protecting Girls by Preventing Child Marriage Act* will require the U.S. government to develop an integrated, strategic approach to protect girls from child marriage. It will also require the State Department to identify countries where child marriage is common in the annual Country Reports on Human Rights Practices.

Young girls and teenagers are not commodities to be sold or traded into marriage. We can stop this practice and ensure that girls have the opportunity to develop, grow and contribute their

skills to strengthening families, communities and entire countries. Congress should act quickly to pass this legislation and give millions of girls worldwide a chance to be girls, not wives.

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